



Antibiotics: Containing the Beta-Lactam Structure (Handbook of Experimental Pharmacology)

Arnold L. Demain, Nadine A. Solomon

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It is quite amazing that the oldest group of medically useful antibiotics, the β -lactams, are still providing basic microbiologists, biochemists, and clinicians with surprises over 50 years after Fleming's discovery of penicillin production by *Penicillium*. By the end of the 1950s, the future of the penicillins seemed doubtful as resistant strains of *Staphylococcus aureus* began to increase in hospital populations. However, the development of semisynthetic penicillins provided new structures with resistance to penicillinase and with broad-spectrum activity. In the 1960s, the discovery of cephalosporin C production by *Cephalosporium* and its conversion to valuable broad-spectrum antibiotics by semisynthetic means excited the world of chemotherapy. In the early 1970s, the 40-year-old notion that β -lactams were produced only by fungi was destroyed by the discovery of cephamycin production by *Streptomyces*. Again this basic discovery was exploited by the development of the semisynthetic cefoxitin, which has even broader activity than earlier β -lactams. Later in the 1970s came the discoveries of nocardicins from *Nocardia*, clavulanic acid from *Streptomyces*, and the carbapenems from *Streptomyces*. Now in the 1980s we learn that β -lactams are produced even by unicellular bacteria and that semisynthetic derivatives of these monobactams may find their way into medicine. Indeed, the future of the prolific β -lactam family seems brighter with each passing decade.

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